

HISTORY OF COAL MINING IN TASMANIA

Introduction

Seams of coal are widely distributed in Tasmania. Early explorers visiting Tasmania often noted coal seams exposed in the coastal cliffs. Settlers found many more outcrops inland and a large number of mines started up. In most cases the coal was of poor quality and the seams were thin and of limited extent, cut off by block faulting.

Significant mining has occurred at Saltwater River on the Tasman Peninsula, in the Mersey field south of Devonport and in the Fingal Valley on the East Coast.

The Tasmanian coal industry was drastically curtailed in the 1960s when industrial users converted boilers to use oil instead of coal and the railways phased out steam locomotives in preference to diesels. The prime use for the coal was that of a boiler fuel, and with the loss of local markets many small mines were forced to close. In recent years a reversal of this policy, converting boilers from oil to coal feed, has been evident and the demand for coal has grown.

Tasmanian coal is now used in industries making a wide variety of paper, newsprint and Portland cement. Production for 1984/85 was 495 726 tonnes from the two operating collieries in north-eastern Tasmania.

Saltwater River Coal Mines

Before the discovery in 1833 of coal at Plunkett Point, the colony of Van Diemen's Land was required to import coal from NSW. High priority was given to locating deposits.

The first mine, opened in 1834, was at Saltwater River on the Tasman Peninsula, where convicts were employed.

The coal mine at Saltwater River began producing coal for the Hobart market in 1834. The workforce comprised convict labour, and conditions in the mine were most unpleasant. The mine headings were only 1-2 m high and the ventilation was poor (Ford, 1932; Burn, 1892). A steam engine was installed in 1842 to raise the coal to the surface. Prior to this the coal was raised up shafts by a winch which used convict labour. Two pumps, which drew water from the workings, also used convict labour.

Until 1840 convicts were sent to work at the coal mine as punishment, although only a small number of those at the mine actually worked underground. The work was no more severe than at Port Arthur and the rations were the same (Besford, 1958). From 1840 to 1848 the convicts working at the mine were those on probation, and were released at the end of their probationary periods (Booth, 1962). Coal was an essential fuel and an important prerequisite for a functioning economy and since only small quantities were found up to 1833, the discovery and subsequent exploitation of the Coal Mines was of considerable importance. Coal was in high demand as many of the officials administering convicts were entitled to an allowance of coal as part of their conditions of pay.

The mines commenced as adits (horizontal tunnels) into a two-metre thick coal seam exposed at the coast. In 1837 Dr John Lohtsky spent 3 months at the mine and charted the mine and coal seams. On his recommendation shafts were sunk and the operation expanded.

By 1841 the operation was mechanised with a steam engine to pump water from the mine shafts. Machinery footings and the remains of a large boiler are evident beside the large shaft. The mines were worked by the method of leaving a column of coal to support the roof of the mine, known as the 'pillar and stall' method. Winding wheels brought up baskets of

coal that were upturned into carts. A system of inclined tramways utilised the natural hills of the landscape to carry the coal from the shafts to the jetties and to the cargo vessels.

Transport to the site was by sea and extensive jetties were constructed to take the coal across the shallow waters of the bay to ships. By 1847 the main shaft was down over 300 feet and there were extensive tunnels and caverns. During its operation the mine produced 60,000 tonnes of coal.

Today the location is the Coal Mines Historic Site which contains a collection of ruins and landscape modifications that tell the story of a convict establishment and penal colliery that operated from 1833-48. At its peak it held up to 500 convicts as well as officers, guards and their families. The Coal Mines Historic Site is an outstanding example of the economic value of convict labour. It played an important role in the early stages of the colony of Van Diemen's Land, which was required to start paying its own way as a means of transition from a penal colony to a free colony.

Mersey Valley Coal Fields

The discovery and quality of coal in the Don and Mersey Valleys attracted many people to the area in the 1850s and early 1860s but the prevalence of faults and thinness of seams precluded later significant developments.

There were at least 10 mines in the Bott Gorge, Denny Gorge, Tarleton and Spreyton areas. Many mines lasted only four or five years, and few were operating beyond 1900.

Fingal Valley

The bulk of the state's coal reserves are found in the Fingal-Mount Nicholas-Dalmayne areas inland from the East Coast.

Coal has been mined by the Cornwall Coal Company in the Fingal Valley for over a century. The company opened the Cornwall Colliery in 1886 and has been in continuous production from the Mount Nicholas and Fingal coalfields since then.

South of Fingal the Merrywood Colliery opened in 1945, with coal being extracted by both underground and open cut methods until 1963. A washing plant was installed in 1957 and coal hauled by road to the railway at Avoca. Recently open-cut extraction on a small scale (1500 tonnes/week) resumed, although this activity will be for a limited period only.

In 2004 coal is mined from the Duncan Colliery at Fingal, the Blackwood Colliery near St Marys and the Kimbolton (open cut) Colliery near Hamilton. Coal from these operations is supplied to a number of local secondary industries. The largest users are the paper factories and cement works which together account for around three quarters of the half million tonnes which is mined annually.

Mining in the Avoca district, in the north-eastern part of the State, began at Mt Christie in 1904. Coal had previously been discovered on the slopes of Ben Lomond in 1864. An adit was driven into this coal cropping out high up in Storys Creek by R. Stevenson in 1882 (Montgomery, 1892), although the distance to market was too great for any mining to be profitable.

The initial attempts at mining were shortlived (Twelvetrees, 1906) although in later years several successful coal mines were in operation. The Excelsior (later known as the Stanhope) was producing in 1923, and mining continued until 1957. Extraction was mostly by the bord and pillar system, although the longwall system was adopted briefly in 1944. In 1960 a bushfire swept across the mine site, and the seam outcrop at the portals caught alight. The old workings are still smouldering, and parts of the ground surface over the mine workings have collapsed. The New Stanhope colliery, 1.3 km north of the (old) Stanhope, opened in 1957. A washing plant was installed in 1959 and mining continued until 1973.

The Mt Christie Colliery was opened in 1959 one of older prospecting adits on the southern flank of This mine, which produced around 1800 tonnes of coal in 1965. in the vicinity Greenstone Hill. per year, closed Recently a new mine has been opened in this area.

The Fenhope Colliery was opened in 1980 close to the (old) Stanhope workings. The mine is owned and operated by Mr D. Fenton. The seam is 3.6 m thick and mining is all done by hand. Coal is wheeled by hand along an impressive wooden gantry to a large wooden storage bin.

The Dalmayne coalfield lies south of Mt Nicholas and south-east of Fingal. outcrops of coal had been known since before 1860 (Gould, 1861) and reward leases were issued in 1887, but no mining eventuated until the ambitious Dalmayne Colliery Company was floated in 1914. The company built an aerial ropeway from the mine site to piccaninny point, a distance of 5.5 km. A jetty 180 m long was built at piccaninny Point for loading the coal. Substantial mine development work occurred and the mine was officially opened by Sir Elliot Lewis, Minister for Mines, on 24 August 1917. However a shortage of boats for shipping the coal (owing to the war) hampered progress and in 1918 the jetty was washed away in a storm. The mine was forced to close, but re-opened in 1939. Coal was transported by road to St Marys until the operation closed in 1953.

At Fingal, south-west from Mt Nicholas, coal had been discovered in the 1840s (Milligan, 1849) but no mining started. The Government of the day financed the digging of an adit in 1864 (HAJ 1867 (95), p. 7). Mining on a small scale continued intermittently for some years. Activity was renewed in 1920 when the Fingal Coal Prospecting Syndicate drove two adits into the outcrop of the Duncan seam on Cat and Kitten Creek. These workings were acquired in 1942 by H.J. Yeates, who opened the Fingal Colliery.

The Duncan Colliery opened adjacent to Yeates in 1945 and the Tasmanian Mine opened in 1954, on the same seam and adjacent to the Fingal Colliery, and work continued here until 1957. Minor activity in 1962-63 was halted due to poor ventilation.

The Fingal Colliery closed in 1965, but was re-opened in 1969 by the management of the Duncan Colliery and the Fingal (Cat) tunnel was retimbered to provide access to the Duncan workings following the closure of the adjacent Duncan tunnel.

The mine was partly mechanised in 1955 with the introduction of an arc-wall coal cutter and two shuttle cars. A washing plant was installed in 1960 to wash coal from the Duncan and Cornwall collieries. Currently the mine is fully mechanised and has the standard modern pit-top facilities of office, bath house, first aid centre, workshop, etc. Production in 1984/85 was 305 865 tonnes. The Duncan seam is approximately three metres thick.

REFERENCES

1986/22. The history of coal mining in Tasmania C.A. Baon